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Singapore youth's new media participation: Consuming, being, learning and schooling

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Abstract

This exploratory paper reports how Singapore youths participate in new media. Drawing from Ito's concept of genres of online participation which showed that youth participation in new media in the United States is largely friendship-driven and/or interest-driven, this qualitative research aims to find out to what extent Singapore youths are engaged in new media to socialize (friendship-driven) and/or pursue self-directed learning (interest-driven). Our study revealed that school has a central influence on their new media engagement. The emphasis on school reflects the influence of Singapore's high-stakes examinations on youth's engagement in new media.

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1. Introduction

New media has become pervasive and has penetrated into every aspect of society. This exploratory study identifies areas of new media participation in which Singapore youths are engaged. With new media, youth's engagement and socialization are no longer limited by geographical boundaries – they extend beyond their offline interactions to online modalities. Hence, in-school and out-of-school learning have been recognised as being intertwined rather than separated (Hird, 2000; DeGennaro, 2008). As they extend social networking beyond face-to-face interactions, the skills and literacies that youths pick up from their online peers add a new dimension that educators must pay attention to.

The purpose of this study is to understand how Singapore youths participate in the new media ecologies. The study explores what the youths are doing when they go online and how they are influenced by new media. A similar study conducted in the United States by the MacArthur Foundation (Ito et al., 2009) described the young engaging in friendship-driven and interest-driven practices. The former describes how the young go about their day-to-day online dialogues, hanging out with friends and peers. By contrast, interest-driven practices centre on specialised activities the young tinker in, learn and exchange with their peers and friends. Do Singapore youths engage with new media the same way as those in the United States? Are there conditions unique to Singapore that influence the youth's engagement and negotiation with these new modes of communication and online socialisation? Youth participation in new media ecologies is pervasive and diverse. Research shows that through their participation in

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new media, youths are developing important new media literacy skills from social networking, civic engagement and gaming (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007; Livingstone & Bovill, 1999).

Using ethnographic case studies, Ito et al. in their book *Hanging Out, Geeking Out and Messing Around* look at today's digital youth in the United States and explore their everyday practices and engagement in the diverse modes of new media. They introduce a framework to contextualize youth practices in the digital media. The authors define two domains of participation as friendship-driven and interest-driven. The authors contend that both are sites of learning (Ito et al., 2009):

1. Friendship-driven practices allow youths to extend their daily interactions through social networks, text messaging and IM. They use networking sites and new media to continue their offline relationships. These friendship-driven activities include friends and peers they meet at school and outside in other activity groups they are involved in. Facebook is an example of one online site;
2. Interest-driven practices include the creation of user-generated content, games and the development of specialized interests. The youths develop friendships through these interest-driven activities.

Research on Singapore youths and new media is in its early formative stages. Most studies are mainly quantitative in nature, as in national surveys on adoption of the Internet, accessibility to technology (Choi, 2008; Kuo & Choi, 2006). These studies provide information on Internet usage and penetration, types of online activities, and online participation defined by age, gender and economic status. Most studies do not focus exclusively on youths. There is a need to study Singapore youth's participation in new media that goes beyond internet accessibility. Some studies explored specific aspects of new media: Lee et al. (2011) focus on the use of social networking for social support; the use of games for specific subject learning in both formal and informal contexts (Chee, 2007); and the use of digital storytelling in informal learning (Anderson & Chua, 2010). Lacking are qualitative studies that examine the extent of Singapore youth's participation in new media ecologies and examine what new media they are using, how they are using it and in what ways the contexts might influence the way they learn and socialise. To find out how Singapore youths are participating in new media environments, the research questions were:

- 1) What types of new media are the youths participating in?
- 2) Why are they engaged in these activities?

2. Method

For this research, seven focus group interviews were carried out with each focus group comprising three to five students. A total of 31 students, from ages 13 to 18 years participated in the interviews. The students were selected based on their high engagement with new media. They are adept at and actively involved in social networking sites, gaming, online chats and digital media. The students were either recommended by teachers in their schools or by community contacts. The duration of each interview was about two hours. During the group interview, participants were asked to describe the types of activities they engaged in online. A semi-structured interview format was used to elicit comments from the participants. All interviews were recorded on audio and video and transcribed for analysis. A grounded theoretical approach was employed for data analysis to identify inductive analysis of emerging patterns and themes. In order that participants remain anonymous, they are referred to in this paper using pseudonyms.

3. Findings

For the purpose of this study, we adopt the definition by Ito and colleagues (Ito et al., 2009) where they define new media as a media ecology where more traditional media, such as books, television, and radio, are converging with digital media, specifically interactive media and media for social communication. The participants in this study showed that they are immersed in and adept at their participation in new media. The popular means of media interactions are twofold. First, youths participate in social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter; and multimedia sites such as YouTube. Second, youths also engage themselves in collaboration such as wikis, blogs and

micro-blogging. The two top sites they are most active in are Facebook and YouTube. Four broad themes can be identified: 1) consuming 2) being 3) learning and 4) schooling. We elaborate on each theme below.

3.1. *Consuming*

Online new media practices allow learners to critically consume and creatively produce knowledge vis-à-vis a participatory culture (Tapscott & Williams, 2006). New media not only allows the young to communicate and retrieve information, it also provides opportunities for them to be content creators. All participants concurred that they spent a large portion of their time on engaged media “consuming” activities on YouTube, and Korean dramas seemed to be a popular genre among this group of youths. Sixteen-year-old Geraldine shared this: “My gosh! I could spend the entire day on the Internet or watching Korean dramas, I didn’t eat lunch, breakfast or dinner. I can just watch dramas all day long. It’s like an addiction.” Other activities include watching their favourite pop artists (e.g., Katy Perry, Jason Bieber, Miley Cyrus), Japanese anime, and listening to music. Yolanda, a 17-year-old participant, succinctly puts it that “YouTube can be considered as our “second life”. This study found that only 7 of the 31 participants had in one time or other created content and uploaded videos to share on YouTube. Five in the group learnt the production skills as part of their school activities. Greg, a 15-year-old participant learned to remix songs via YouTube and then uploaded his remixes to share with his friends. Samantha (14 years old) had produced a current affairs documentary and shared her videos. Besides video creation, Yolanda was the only participant in the group who writes fiction and shares her works online. She said that she learnt to write better because of her online fiction-writing group who gave her support and tips on how to craft her writing.

The extent that they participated in gaming varied within the group. Most of them preferred the social games in Facebook like Bejeweled Blitz, Mousetrap, and Farmville. About a quarter in this group played online games like World of Warcraft, Defence of the Ancient and Final Fantasy. There is little evidence that any of the students here were ‘geeking out’.

The participants in this study tend to be content consumers of information and views rather than creators. Watching television dramas, Japanese animation, listening to music online and gaming are seen as merely for relaxation and entertainment. Most of them show that they are new media consumers rather than prosumers. Yolanda was the exception who writes and shares fictional works and gained tips from collaborating with other writers online. The focus on consumption rather than production is limiting. There was minimal knowledge creation which is a critical skill for learning in the 21st century. It is essential for our young to not only be critical consumers of information but also creative producers of knowledge (Jenkins et al., 2006; Brown & Thomas, 2011).

3.2. *Being*

What motivates the youths to spend time on social networking? One of the attractions is the ability to continue socializing with their friends online. In our study, friends influence their choice of and participation in social networking sites and their interactions are defined by how they would like to develop their identities. Their involvement in new media sites such as Facebook, Twitter or Tumblr, was often via their friends. Fiona, a 17-year-old participant remarked that she joined Facebook because most of her friends have Facebook so she had to go with the times. A number of the participants disclosed that they moved from Friendster to Facebook when all their friends migrated to the latter. Fourteen-year-old Ida expressed, “When other people already have it and you don’t have it, you feel like an outcast, you feel like you’re living in a cave or something. When everybody has Facebook, they will ask you, why you don’t.”

Facebook is the most popular social networking site among our participants. All of our participants have a Facebook account though their engagement varies from the common notifications and status updates to sharing of photos, links and videos. The frequency of participation in Facebook also varies from individual to individual. Some feel that Facebook is part and parcel of their everyday life. Yolanda commented, “if you don’t have Facebook now, you don’t have a life.” The pervasiveness of Facebook in the youth’s life is further reinforced by 18-year-old male participant, Sharif, who stated that the first thing he does when he goes online is to check on his Facebook updates.

About three quarters of our participants blog (including micro-blog Twitter), using it as a platform for making a record of their daily lives - a digital diary that recounts everything that they've done and what they feel about certain issues. They see blogging as a platform to express themselves and if they do share it, it will be within a small circle of friends or will keep them private. They "scoop" the latest snippets of their friends' life – what they are doing, how they are feeling, and give support when needed. This reciprocal status check allows them to continue their friendships and extend their socialization from face-to-face to online.

They also view going online as a de-stress activity. They escape to the online space when they want to relax and take a break. They go online purely for relaxation, a break from schoolwork. They also see online chats and networking sites as channels to release their feelings – to share with their friends how they feel, something they are not able to do face-to-face. Sixteen-year-old James highlighted that he and his friends blog to "emote". He said, "you blog about what you feel, the negative feelings, feelings of angst, feelings of rejection. And you are less closed online than face-to-face as you have less qualms of exposing your feelings more."

Generally, the participants are knowledgeable in negotiating the different media sites and their socialisation affordances. In addition to socialization is their awareness of using new media for managing their identities.

3.3. Learning

This study shows that participants used online resources like news channels, Wikipedia, and Google for school research pertaining to certain subject domains like Geography and Languages. Seth, who is 18 years old, stated that he goes online only for school project research. The students are also adept in using collaborative communicative online tools like Google docs, Facebook, and chats to discuss schoolwork and activities.

Learning now is borderless and not confined to only school. Learning can take place anytime, anywhere. Participants used multimedia channels like YouTube to search for educational tutorials to help them learn new things like playing a guitar, tying knots, braiding. Stephanie (18 years old) acknowledged that, "YouTube is another form of education. You watch the videos, for example, on how to hold the guitar chords. So that's how I learn." Our findings show that the participants tend to use of new media for both formal and informal learning.

3.4. Schooling

The participants emphasized that their online activities are not only organised around school but also the time spent online is dictated by the school assignments and homework. They viewed that the more time they spend engaging in online activities means the less time they have for their school work. In addition, their parents often watch over their time spent online. School plays a central role in the way they participate and engage in their online activities. Hence, their participation in new media can be described as school-driven. Seth lamented that he doesn't have time to engage in online activities to relax or for entertainment. If he spends more time watching Korean dramas, that will definitely sacrifice his studying time. They are also mindful that their parents will limit their use of the computer. A number of the participants disclosed that they had their computers confiscated when their grades suffered.

The school-driven activities can be divided into the three categories:

1. Activity coordination – new media sites are used to organize school activities as well as the students' extracurricular events they participate. For example, they create Facebook groups to share information about homework.
2. Information collection: Students go online checking out information from online news sources, Wikipedia, Google. They collate the information for research or to help them complete their assignments. They use Facebook to share links and disseminate assignments.
3. Project collaboration – They use new media to collaborate with their classmates on group assignments and projects.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The Internet and social networking sites provide a channel for people to connect beyond geographic restrictions and connect with new people (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Our study shows that the participants' use of new media is mainly social in nature. New media allows for the extension of offline relationships. Yolanda said, "the attract factor for Facebook is that I can make friends, and talk to my friends and continue the friendship." They socialize with people they already know and are loosely connected with: friends of friends. Similarly, the youth in this study are more engaged in friendship-driven than in interest-driven activities. This is similar to Ito's study (Ito et al. 2009) regarding the majority of the youth in the United States.

Research has shown that interest-driven activities and play, such as gaming are sites for learning (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2011). However, the participants feel that playing games is just for fun. They also elaborated that their parents view gaming and interest-driven activities as a waste of time and should take second place to school activities. The potential of gaming for deep learning and complex problem-solving is not recognized by the students and their parents. They "censor" themselves if they spend too much time gaming or in their interest-driven activities. Parental attitudes towards gaming sites and new media potential for learning are rather conservative. Their friendship- and interest-driven activities are constrained by school. Eighteen-year-old Stephanie said, "if we study at home, it's just us facing our books and nothing else. Then when we are tired, we just go online - that's why we are really interested to go online – to find something else to do other than our school work."

This study gives a broad snapshot of how youths in Singapore use new media. The youth are more engaged in friendship-driven activities than interest-driven activities. School-driven participation is central to their online engagement. As educators see the potential in leveraging deeper learning from a more participatory and creative culture, the youth needs to be encouraged to play and partake more in interest-driven learning both in and outside of school. This study is limited by the sample size and its self-reporting evidence. Nevertheless, a more substantive ethnographic study which entails observing youth as they participate online both at school and at play will provide a deeper understanding of Singapore youth participation in media ecologies.

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